

Learning a Rare Language: a Case of a Japanese Learner of the Thai Language

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I. Introduction – an Experience of Learning the Thai Language

This is a report of an unusual story language-learning-wise; a Japanese adult decided to learn the Thai language, which is a very rare language to be wished to learn in Japan. I found out one day coincidentally that one of the people I know was the very person that speaks Thai. He used to be the vice-principal at a public elementary school where I was a committee member of the board of education in the municipal. We used to work together in the committee for school evaluation and further improvement of the educational environment for the elementary school. He had a special experience abroad in his long and established career as a teacher; before starting working in the school of our district, he had worked in a Japanese public school in Bangkok. He retired several years ago from our local elementary school, but since then he has been directly working for the board of education a few days a week. Now he has somewhat free time to share his interesting and peculiar story with me. Further explanation about the circumstances is to be done later in this article.

Learning/teaching English has been spread universally on a global scale in this century. It is also true here in Japan. Recognized as the “Lingua Franca” officially, English is the foreign language that Japan has been pushing to teach its people. NHK Educational¹⁾ currently operates at least twenty English programs in their language education-related radio and television projects, in NHK Gogaku²⁾. It is interesting and encouraging, as an English teacher, to witness that English education is propelled at a national level in this country.

Contrastingly, however, I have been also observing, with great interest, a phenomenon that some languages have very few learners in Japan. As a Japanese user of one of those “rare” languages³⁾ (in my case, Dutch⁴⁾), the learners of those “rare” languages have always attracted me. I am interested in those learners from the viewpoints of the following:

- What made the learner to decide to learn the target language (motivation)?
- How did the learner learn the target language (approach)?
- Which level has (did) the learner reach(ed) in practical usage of the target language?
- How has (did) the fact of acquisition of the target language influence(d) the learner’s life afterwards?
- How does the learner feel / what does the learner think about learning the target language?
- What is the meaning of the learner’s learning the target language?

One day, I got an occasion to ask those questions directly to the very person mentioned earlier in this report. Although it was quite a limited amount of time, he frankly answered my questions within the possible range. It was truly interesting so that I have decided to share the experience with the readers. Also, this article attempts to explore if we could find any pedagogical implications in second language acquisition (SLA), particularly when the target language is not a major foreign language.

II. Learning the Thai Language

According to Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Thai is the sole official and national language used in the Kingdom of Thailand, holding approximately 62 million speakers⁵⁾. The Thai language belongs to the Tai group of the Ka-Dai language family. The Thai Branch is the Southwest group of Tai. Edmondson and Solnit described that there are mainly two hypotheses regarding how to analyze these language families (1997)⁶⁾ as shown in charts 1 and 2.

It is very rare to find the learners of Thai in Japan except at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and at the School of Foreign Studies of Osaka University. Suzuki and Okuma confirmed this phenomenon in their study (2004, p. 344)⁷⁾ in which they pursued to find out 1) why some Japanese want to learn Thai (whilst why the Thai want to learn Japanese) and 2) what the role of language-learning is in globalization (p. 344).

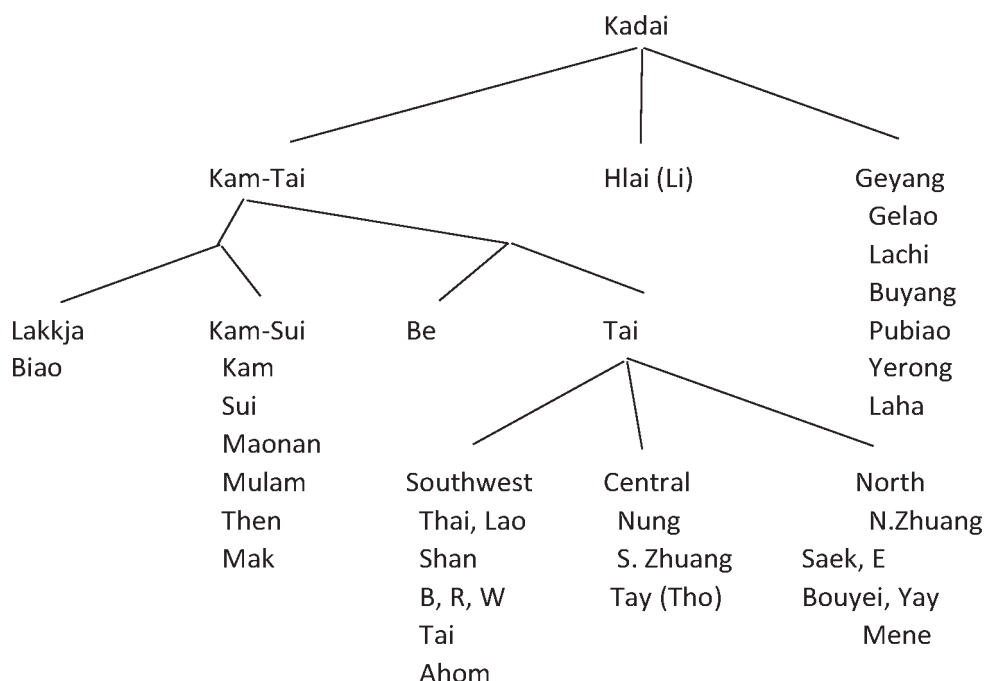


Chart 1: “The Kadai Hypothesis” by Edmondson and Solnit (1997) p. 2

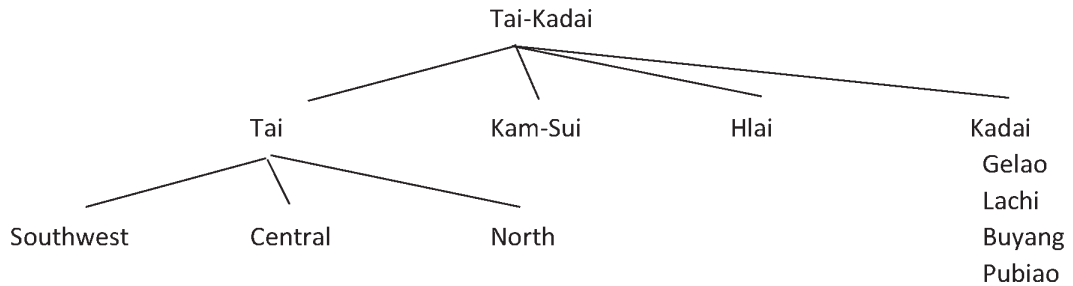


Chart 2: “The Tai-Kadai Hypothesis” by Edmondson and Solnit (1997) p. 3

From the linguistic point of view, the School of Foreign Studies of Osaka University explains that the Thai language has four major features that differ from Japanese: 1) it is a tonal language, 2) there are no paradigmatic inflections in the gender, number, case and time-phase, 3) it is a rich language in the types and number of vowels and consonants, and 4) it has established a unique orthography of its own (2018)⁸⁾. At the same time, it encourages to promote the Thai education in Japan based on the idea that the two countries have had a strong connection with each other historically and economically⁹⁾. The official data by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan also confirms that the two countries have maintained a long, friendly relationship over last 600 years, and there are over 70,000 Japanese living in Thailand in 2016 (2018)¹⁰⁾.

As expected from the report of Suzuki and Okuno, it is to be remarked that there is no program for learning the Thai language by NHK Educational (radio and TV), except for the mere case in which they just once made a single program about “Thai for traveling” (2005)¹¹⁾ accompanied by the textbook of 112 pages. NHK offers diverse courses of English, Chinese, Hangul, Italian, German, French, Spanish, Russian, and Arabic, but they offer no programs for Thai (nor Dutch)¹²⁾. Under those circumstances, a natural interest rises what kind of Japanese would feel like learning the Thai language.

III. Conducting the Interview

The interview took place in early June this year. It was conducted in a quiet room on the campus of the university where I teach. Although it was done orally, the interviewer conducted a clear explanation of the interview’s purpose, procedure and consequence¹³⁾, and the interviewee gave his permission. He agreed about the procedure as well. Thus, the interview was carried out in the way of “chatting” as a form of narrative communication (several questions were inserted occasionally by the interviewer while the interviewee is asked to talk freely and vividly) over a cup of tea, and it was allowed to be recorded while the interviewer was taking notes. The whole procedure took about fifty minutes. It was a tranquil and peaceful moment that we could share with each other. Through the entire process, both the interviewer and the interviewee were comfortable; only the ending time had to be remembered because of

the interviewee's schedule.

The following is the record of this meeting; however, due to the length and the redundancy of the content, only several impressive episodes are introduced in this article:

I asked the interviewee the first question: this is the very first time that I encountered a Japanese person who has a learning experience of Thai. What made you decide to learn the language? Then he started explaining. When he was younger, he was hoping to get a teaching position at a Japanese school abroad. Frankly speaking, he did not care much about where. He was simply interested in going abroad and teaching Japanese children there. When filling out the application form, he speculated that he might get little chance to be sent to North America and Europe because those were highly competitive places. He wrote down "Thailand" as his fifth candidate because he thought there might be a chance there, which was right. The Ministry of Education decided to send him to Thailand. Thus he was selected as one of the teaching staff of a Japanese school abroad. In those days, all candidates for Thailand were sent to Tsukuba for a two-week seminar, where they got the necessary information to prepare for working over there. Besides that, there was one crucial requirement at that time: all teaching staff and pupils had to learn the Thai language in Thailand (they were very strict about that). The target level was the sixth grade of the Thai elementary school. Concerning the school curriculum for the Japanese school, the Thai government required to program the Thai class – two hours a week. This came from the idea that they were never going to be "colonized" by any other force from outside. In order to keep their independence, keeping their own language was essential. That was their explanation. It was in 1987, and at that time, only the United States and Japan were admitted to have their own schools that were officially recognized in Thailand. So he had no choice but studying Thai. It was not because he really wanted to learn the language.

Now, previously, he told that the target level the teachers had to reach was that of the sixth grade, which later turned out to be too demanding (tragically, about half did not pass the required language exam in his previous cohort); by the time his former colleagues were sent back to Japan and his cohort was going to be sent, the hurdle had been set lower. After all, they were required to master the level of the second graders. There was a criticism from the parents of the Japanese school that the teaching staff should more focus on educating and taking care of their pupils than studying Thai so desperately all the time, which contributed to changing the situation of those days. Several years later, the whole system got abolished and now the teaching staff has no need to study Thai to go and work over there. However, he told that the survivors of the tougher Thai program (targeting the sixth grade) in his former cohort were really good users of Thai. They had no problem helping him negotiate with the local real estate agency, and so on.

I asked another question: What about the teaching materials? What kind of materials did you use to study Thai? How did you actually study Thai once you arrived in Bangkok? – He told that the cohort used a hand-made textbook by the Thai teacher of the Japanese school at first; it was a simple one with basic conversations. Then, they switched to the textbook implemented in the

language school once they started taking the Thai class there. It consisted of models of conversations as well. Then about four months later, they switched to the textbook written in the Thai orthography (Thai writing system). In the end, he was using textbooks offered by the Japanese school together with the materials prepared by his private tutor. He found a language school in Bangkok, so besides all the other studying system he was involved in, he enrolled himself in that school privately.

There was another place where he could learn: home. He and his wife had a helper (a “maid”) for house-keeping chores who understood only Thai. So it was an urgent need, especially for his wife, the housewife, to pick up the words and phrases which were needed for minimum daily conversations. Together with gestures, they managed to communicate with their house-helper, which was quite effective for learning the practical language in daily life. The other method he recalled was going to the downtown. The ultimate goal there was, for him, to make himself understood when doing shopping, for example. It was not even the target in the beginning, to understand the people in the street because it was almost impossible. He, therefore, mainly focused to be able to convey what he wanted to say to the people. For that, he first needed to be able to count (numbers were important), and then had to know how to say “how many” and “how much” and the things like that. Being able to read what was written was as important as speaking and listening. Looking back, it was a strategically effective way of learning a foreign language, to be more accurate, learning how to use the language in a practical manner.

He further described their life in Bangkok. There were a number of Japanese residents in the capital, yet, for most of them, there was actually no need to know Thai. He testified that most of them used to work at Japanese companies where they could easily handle business in Japanese (and eventually a bit of English). The local staff had a good command of Japanese and English. As far as living in Bangkok by just going back and forth between the office and home, you could survive without Thai.

Without being asked, he continued and showed a couple of his unique opinions about foreign language learning. One of them sounded pretty amusing: the type of Japanese people who manage to acquire Thai were not top elites but more a sort of a “player”: they were always curious about many different things over there and trying to get in touch with the local folks. This makes sense; those people needed to understand and speak Thai. Another view he showed was about who would pick up the target foreign language faster. According to him, those who are talented in music and sports have a greater chance to achieve the goal when studying the target language, especially those who are rhythmical and be able to sing well. This idea came from his empirical impression about the people around him, and he said he envied them always. He himself does not have that sort of talent – according to him, but he tried to keep learning, taking advantage of any situation while living over there. He and his wife tried to lead a bilingual life – using Japanese at home and the Japanese school while speaking Thai with the house-staff (the maid worked from 6:00 to 18:00, and went home) at home and the local people in the city. After spending fruitful three years in Bangkok, he came back to Tokyo. It was in March, 1991.

I asked him if there was any problem in his language usage. He recalled that, when he was learning Thai in Bangkok, he had an interesting trouble – when he had to speak Thai, he automatically started speaking English, and then started mixing English and Thai. Back in Tokyo, he was bothered by himself by unconsciously beginning to speak Thai instead of English or Japanese. He was confused by this phenomenon that he encountered. For the rest, he did not remember any obstacle, such as reverse culture shock, in daily life by coming back to Tokyo.

In the process of studying Thai, he began using the teaching materials written in the Thai orthography, or the unique writing system of Thai, after the first four months. It was not straightforward, but “things started making sense”. (As mentioned earlier, he wanted to be able to read what was written everywhere in the town.) It was not only reading that was tough; in the beginning, he found listening comprehension the hardest. First, he hardly understood the local people, but gradually, after a number of trials and errors in practice, he started understanding Thai that was actually used in the street.

My final question was: “What do you think now about your experience in Thailand?” The following was his statement: It was a tremendously positive experience for his life later. Before the experience, he feels that he had merely one perspective – the perspective as a Japanese person. However, after the experience, he feels that he has acquired another perspective. This certainly affects his inner world, in the way of looking at phenomena in the society, and interpreting them. Occasionally a question rose in his mind, for instance, “Why are the Japanese doing things like that?” One concrete example was about spending money. While the Japanese try to save money, the Thai spend it. This is the way they live and enjoy life. He tried to figure out what made the difference and he thinks he has found it out. There is scarcely starvation in Thailand. Although people are not wealthy in general, they can survive each day. So they don’t worry about living very much. He has realized, thus, by coming to Thailand, that there is another way of living a life.

Nowadays, back in Tokyo, he likes flying back to Thailand sometimes to enjoy renewing his old friendship in Thai. Without the three-year stay in Bangkok and learning the local language, this would never have happened. It is certainly a great treasure in his life, which will remain in his mind. At the same time, he has an impression, lately, that the whole country has become much wealthier than ever, and he wants to carefully watch over the country’s future evolution.

IV. Discussion

It was a pleasant and meaningful meeting, and in the interviewee’s narrative¹⁴⁾, we can distill some thought-provoking ideas and information in each episode of the whole, as a narrative analysis¹⁵⁾ (Flick, p. 268). We aim to explore if we could find any pedagogical insights in SLA by careful observation and analysis of the narrative (p. 86) as the consequence of taking the qualitative research method¹⁶⁾ (p. 270).

Dörnyei advocated that “motivation” plays a significant role in language learning (Dörnyei, p. 65). According to the interviewee, the reason he studied Thai was not from “intrinsic

motivation” (p. 78), but “extrinsic motivation” that is driven by a luculent reason such as getting some rewards from others, or this motivation could be called “instrumental” as well (p. 70), which is strongly related to the learner’s concrete purpose such as getting an increased salary or/and better career opportunities in the future. In this case, the learner happened to choose Thailand to be sent to because of a seemingly better chance of success; in other words, it did not have to be Thai that he would study. He simply wanted to work abroad and because the Ministry chose Thailand for him, it was purely a coincidental consequence. In any case, once the project was set for him, he had to study Thai very hard for the specific goal, which brought an effective result in his case.

The various learning approaches he took turned out to have brought a productive result. From the very beginning, even already in Japan, he received an official education in the target language at school. It was how the study began: a properly organized and carried out plan. If designed by language-teaching professionals, this is a most efficient form to enable the learner to reach the intended level of the target language because the holistic program is intended to teach/study the language systematically. Recalling my own experience of learning Dutch in Flanders, Belgium, I am also certain that any beginner should start his/her language education at school, where the basic rules in using the language are systematically and efficiently taught so that the learner can achieve the goal in an effective manner with the support of the professionals. Because Dutch was not a language that everybody was learning in Japan, a very limited number of teaching materials was available at that time. The only way was getting to the real place where Dutch was used, living there, and learning it; using it in the real world while receiving a firm theoretical background in the frame of school education. A couple of people I got known to over there (one was from the Far East and the other from Eastern Europe) did not get the chance to go to school immediately after arriving in Flanders, and they picked up the language in the street. It looked like that it was tremendously difficult for them to forget about all the “wrong” forms they had acquired and to reeducate themselves in order to be able to use the respectable language that the educated were supposed to use.

Getting through this state, the interviewee entered the next phase: using the language in practice. It was from necessity that he used the target language. It was needed for him to be able to communicate with the local people - in order to be able to negotiate and get a better deal when shopping for something in downtown, and so on. Richards and Rodgers mentioned about the idea of “the whole language” that means reading and writing are taught for fostering the learner’s natural and real communication (2001, pp. 108-109). Moreover, they referred to an interesting phenomenon: language learning is also believed to be more motivating when the learners are focusing on something else than language, such as ideas, issues and opinions (p. 210). They further talked about the significance of “authentic” texts, both written and spoken which the learners will encounter in the real world (pp. 210-211) as teaching materials. Considering all of them together, the school education and the actual interaction in the real world functioned most effectively and synergistically, as if they were a set of wheels that propelled the learner’s mind to use the target language.

All the remarks made in the interviewee's narrative cast profound insights on the reality of language learning. He knew empirically who would succeed in achieving the level of using the target language naturally in real life (not elite business people but the hanging-around type), which is the idea of "willingness to communicate" (Dörnyei, p. 207). When he talked about some people with musical talent or/and with motor skills, it meant the "aptitude" issue in the discussion about the concept of "individual differences" (Dörnyei, p. 7). Those two issues are also strongly related to the topics of "learner's strategies" (Dörnyei, p. 85) as a complexity in the language learning theory.

V. Conclusion

Life does not always go straightforward if you live in a foreign country as a foreigner; you have to adapt yourself to be able to fit in a totally new environment, in order to live comfortably. You have to learn the needed language to get along with your new neighbors and to get known to the new community. You might also want to know more about the culture over there. You might even want to make some friends out of the local folks you will encounter. It is indeed not easy to achieve what I have just written down. In his narrative, the interviewee talked about the elements discussed above. He wanted to have a reasonably good command of the Thai language to the extent that he could comprehend his Thai counterparts in daily life and make himself understood for them; in other words, he wanted to be able to communicate with other people in Thai.

He gave us a beautiful remark in his talk as well. There is a new perspective he acquired while living outside Japan. It would never have happened to him without this special experience of living in Thailand and speaking Thai for three years. It was a sort of anthropological discovery that there are people who live in a very different way from his compatriots, which derives from the cultural differences. He always wanted to go abroad and by working hard for that, his dream came true. He enjoyed life while living in Thailand. He is happy that he has had this experience and his life has become richer by acquiring another language. It is deeply connected to the issue of identity and language learning.

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End Notes

- 1) “NHK Educational since its establishment in 1989 has been developing step by step as a creative team with high expertise in the fields of child and infant, school education, art, culture, language, hobby, practice, science, and health—a domain under the guiding principle of “creating a wide range and variety of educational contents.” As a member of the NHK group that supports public broadcasting, we produce more than 10,000 programs a year centering on NHK Educational TV. At the same time, we engage in broad areas of business, including planning and creation of visual software related to the programs and to character business.” <http://www.nhk-cd.co.jp/english>
- 2) <https://www2.nhk.or.jp/gogaku/english/>
- 3) JAT (Japan Association of Translators). As those who can handle the Dutch language, only four translators (including Nishikawa-Van Eester, M.) are officially registered in the association that holds over 700 members all over the world, and Nishikawa (-Van Eester) is one of the two based in Japan. <https://jat.org/translators>
- 4) Concerning the Dutch-speaking population, the following figures are indicated. The Netherlands: 17 million speakers (also Frisian in Friesland); Belgium (Flanders): 6.5 million speakers (also French and German as official languages); Suriname: 0.5 million speakers (more than 20 different native languages); Former Netherlands Antilles (= 6 islands in the Caribbean Sea: till 10-10-2010; *3 Benedenwindse Eilanden* (= Leeward Islands): Aruba, Bonaire & Curaçao; *3 Bovenwindse Eilanden* (= Windward Islands): Saba, Sint-Eustatius & Sint-Maarten - All islands are part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, but Aruba (since 1986) and Curaçao and Sint-Maarten (since 2010) has a *status aparte* (= an autonomous state) within the Kingdom, while Bonaire, Saba & Sint-Eustatius are *bijzondere gemeenten* (= special municipalities) of the country the Netherlands itself; Indonesia: spoken by older people, in use as source language (law & education). *Taalunie*, or the Dutch Language Union. Facts and figures. <http://over.taalunie.org/facts-and-figures>
- 5) Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Language Modules. The Thai language. <http://www.coelang.tufs.ac.jp/mt/th/index.html>
- 6) “Comparative Kadai – The Tai Branch”. Edmondson & Solnit. pp. 2-3.
- 7) In their article, Suzuki and Okuno stated as follows: “Although more and more Japanese people have started learning Thai, it is still regarded as a foreign language that is not important enough and its status is also low.”
- 8) http://www.sfs.osaka-u.ac.jp/about_fs/edu_fl_tha.html
- 9) “Thailand and Japan have enjoyed their intimate relation since 1980s. Because of its conspicuous development, Thailand holds more than a thousand Japanese companies in its land. It also attracts about a million of Japanese tourists annually while there are 5 to 6 million Japanese long-term residents.” The School of Foreign Studies of Osaka University. http://www.sfs.osaka-u.ac.jp/about_fs/edu_fl_tha.html
- 10) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

- 11) “Tabi suru Tai-go (Thai for traveling)” by NHK TV (June, 2005). Textbook for May 31-June 23 (on air). ISBN 4-14-189269-6.
- 12) Retrieved on June 15, 2018, from <https://www2.nhk.or.jp/gogaku/>. Meanwhile, NHK has 20 different radio and TV programs for English in total.
- 13) As a consequence of this interview, the interviewer might publish its record, and the interviewee agreed that it could happen.
- 14) “A story told by a sequence of words, actions or images, and more generally the organization of the information within that story” by Flickr.
- 15) “A study of narrative data which takes the context of the whole narrative into account” by Flickr.
- 16) “A research method aiming at a detailed description of processes and views that are therefore used with small numbers of cases in the data collection” by Flickr.